Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

52 | Spring 2009
General issue

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/970
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2009
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde, « Saroyan's lonely fruitcakes, and other goofs: strategies of resistance to the culture of abundance », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 52 | Spring 2009, Online since 01 December 2010, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/970

Saroyan's lonely fruitcakes, and other goofs: strategies of resistance to the culture of abundance

Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde

1 In the preface to his 1950 collection *The Whole Voyald and Other Stories* William Saroyan lays bare the position of the genuine writer as a nonconformist: "The writer is a spiritual anarchist ... discontented with everything and everybody ... he neither walks with the multitude nor cheers with them. The writer ... is a rebel who never stops. He is the easiest man to belittle, dismiss and scorn.... He is also mad, measurably so, but saner than all others with the best sanity, the only sanity worth bothering about – the living, creative, vulnerable, valorous, unintimidated, and arrogant sanity of a free man (1950: 14). In *Horsey Gorsey and the Frog* (1968), a seemingly innocent children's tale, the writer celebrates, once more, those who remain on the fringes and dare to defy, through their eccentricities, the norms of society. Through the dialogue of a blue horse and a green frog, we discover the inevitable clash between the mainstream ideas and the marginal values. The horse believes that the world can be made only of blue horses, so the frog must be a strange-looking horse, but a quadruped after all. The frog vindicates its right to have a different nature, even though there seems to be no other frog nearby to validate its assertion. Moreover, in opposition to the horse's affirmation that races are the only occupation that makes everything worthwhile, the frog despises the thought of life as a cutthroat competition. Winning or losing are notions that remain immaterial. Sitting idly on a wet rock is what life is all about. Living is, after all, not a race but a waiting game.

2 Walter Cummins observes that "[t]he people with whom Saroyan sympathizes are those who live at the edge of a social system they can't beat and yet gain insights into the heart of things ... the outcasts, rogues, rebels, those who transcend the rules of the commonplace" (1995: 169-176). Unlike Anderson's grotesques or McCullers's freaks, Saroyan's fruitcakes pursue absurd dreams and feel proud of their odd identity in a homogenising, difference-levelling world. "Don't join, don't join anything," that is the

piece of advice that the writer gives to his fellow-citizens in an attempt to preserve their almost disintegrated individualism (Saroyan 1973: 505). Despite the fact that conformism dominates the average American citizen, now defined as "other-directed," i.e. too frightened about the disapproval of the peer-group (Riesman 1950), Saroyan's anomics provide an alternative to the socially adjusted patterns. "Statistics show that any man in good health is out of step with the rest of the world ... such misfits are becoming fewer and fewer" (Saroyan, "Good Health," 1936a:1).

3 In the following pages I will attempt to prove that not only does William Saroyan's short fiction eyewitness the consolidation of the "culture of abundance" in the thirties and forties, but challenges and contests many of its prevailing principles and institutions as well. Warren I. Susman (1985) argues that the central conflict in contemporary America moves around the opposition between the old Puritan culture of frugality and the emergent culture of abundance. The new driving force of economy is no longer the workers' labor force but their power as consumers. Spending and not saving, self-fulfillment and not salvation, personality and not self-reliance, become the tenets of the dominant ethos, and the new aspirations of the reshaped citizen. By converting workers into consuming masses the nation managed to overcome the 1929 crisis, a strategic operation, Jean Baudrillard noted, which assured the survival of the economic system smothered with a crisis of circulation (Gane 1991: 69). Without people with money to buy, capitalism was sentenced to death. The new culture deployed a series of strategies (advertising, popular psychology, movies and radio, leisure activities, the five-day working week, the supermarket, etc.) which undermined the moral principles of self-denial and sacrifice, and instilled the worship of personal growth and magnetic personality as tickets to success both in the workplace and in the private sphere. As Baudrillard put it, the modern individual was irremediably forced to become "an enterprise of pleasure and satisfaction" (1988: 48).

4 Saroyan's ideological position regarding the culture of abundance is made unambiguous from the very beginning. Since the publication of the 1934 volume *The Daring Young Man and Other Stories* and the 1936 collection *Inhale and Exhale*, his target of criticism was invariably the transformation of American citizens during the Depression into a mass of half-asleep, confused, robot-like creatures who go to work, eat, and spend their leisure time in movie houses without discovering what life is all about. The problem with his fellow citizens is that their lives lack "a real sense" (Saroyan, "The Life" 1983: 216); their tragedy consists of "not knowing where they are going or coming" (217). In "Friday Unlingual Silence," a piece of experimental writing that resembles the language proposed by Eugene Jolas, i.e. "the paramyth," a synthesis of "the dream, daydream, the mystic vision" (Jolas 1949: 29), Americans are compared with "one-celled structures" which have been stultified with "the contemporary obligation" of buying. Spending their salaries on "useless gasoline vehicles" and "pointless cinemas" does not only bring about the "sterility of the most hopeless sort" but also helps reinforce the strength of a state which supports war and genocide: "and in the long run provided you purchase now you may learn you have graced the state with pink shirted stormtroopers."

> The ghastly elimination of the economicessentialness [sic] ... is the necessary beginningpoint [sic] from which man is to achieve eventually that clarity of humanmotives [sic] which will extend the purpose of sensory awareness to a sphere of something related to godliness (1936b: 2).

5 Competition, the push and rush of American society, the mechanical jobs which degrade people, the money obsession and the endless motion without a goal have created an efficient, frazzled worker, a piece of human machinery, "perfected and patented"; a citizen who proves to be passive and docile, devoid of senses, and whose efforts to achieve a magnetic personality have resulted in the obliteration of their egos, i.e. the suppression of their distinctiveness as individuals. As Saroyan asserts it in "The people, yes, and then again, no," "[s]ince they have decided that the world is not for the people, except in oratory, what is needed is the racially pure piece of machinery as man" (1938a: 162-163).

6 In the 1935 summer review of "The Daring Young Man," Philip Rahv defines Saroyan's craft as "a lesson in the atrophy of taste and decay of values" (qtd. in Foster 1991: 33). The reason is that he has resorted to the outdated weapons of modernists to tackle with the problems of an ever-changing, fragile world: aesthetic retreat, language experimentation, mystic vision, and dreams. Too frightened to join the social strife, he has built up a tower to defend himself from the turmoil of society, but the fortress looks rundown and obsolete even before it has been erected.

His fiction is therefore a repository of residual values.[1] Yet Saroyan himself honestly believed that the true purpose of art was religious in an etymological sense (from Latin *religare*, "bind"), insofar as it aimed to recover the bonds that man has lost to connect himself with the world again and "to right wrongs, to clean up social inequities," (Tompins 1967: 7). In his own words, "[a] writer's only reason for being is to seek to change the lopsided to the balanced –in short, to change the world" (1959: 2). Writing is praying, confesses Joe, the poet who defines the world as being in a state of "Babylonian confusion" (Saroyan 1956: 15). Not in vain, Nona Balakian (1998: 13) has convincingly argued that "[t]he possibility that life could be improved by art remained uppermost in Saroyan's consciousness."

7 My contention is that both interpretations may be not contradictory, and certainly do not rule out each other. It is true that the Californian writer avoided taking sides with the Marxist credo, and retreated into the Emersonian ideals of dream, sleep, beauty as the vehicles of self-expression. Yet his intention is clearly didactic insofar as his short stories aim to show, through different methods, how absurd, illogical and meaningless his fellow citizens' lives have become. "Living is a gyp, a swindle ... a first-rate wish, a tenth-rate fulfilment," Jesse's uncle affirms in *The Hero of the World* (1939a: 60). In order to reach his goal Saroyan unmasks the fallacies of the culture of abundance into which Americans seem to be indoctrinated, and helps them open their eyes and start to see. Throughout his short fiction, but also in his drama, he debunks two important myths and institutions of the dominant culture we are going to deal with separately, even though they constantly overlap: the myth of success and personality, and the tantalizing influence of movies and ads. "If our time has selected falsity instead of truth" (Saroyan 1938b: 795), Saroyan's purpose is, as I discussed elsewhere, "to lift the veil of the American socio-political simulacrum" (Aguilera-Linde 2002: 26) in order to show his readers how little their consumer aspirations can help them overcome the overwhelming loneliness and deprivation of present reality.

Personality, the key to success

8 The mass of faceless white-collar workers of big cities but also the small town farmers of Saroyan's short stories have become living dead, loners who get by on food, water and air and who are not in the least aware of the futility and emptiness of living, simply because they have been cheated with the spurious dream of success: "We forget to focus our vision on the splendid things and we lose track of our proper function here ... The competitiveness of our time oppresses and we forget all the essential things" ("Panorama Unmerciful," *Inhale and Exhale*, 242).

9 Susman discusses that since the experience of the Great Depression was viewed as one of individual failure, the solution lay in the discovery of the paths to success. This was the "age of the how-to-do-it book" and of Dale Carnegie's *How to win friends and influence people*, "the best seller of the period" (1984: 165). The method suggested by Carnegie was "adjustment to the existing other": since "everybody wanted to feel important, the way to get ahead was to *make* other people feel important. Smile!" In other words, try to fit in and be well liked. Many of Saroyan's stories are parodies of the self-help book genre. Parody is, as Linda Hutcheon (2000: 85) holds, one of the techniques of "self-referentiality" that reveals both the narrator and the reader's "awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning." "O smile and say ah-ha ah-ha" (*Inhale and Exhale*, 346) is what the narrator, obviously tongue in cheek, asks his protagonist to do over and over again in order to face the threats of the world: his lack of money, and the overwhelming mechanization of the cityscape he contemplates. In "Seven Easy Ways to Make a Million Dollars" (1938c: 1; 1983: 178-181) he provides a list of the things required to make the grade. "Hungry? Poverty-stricken? Worried? Cheer up. You too can be a millionaire." In a language reminiscent of ads and mail catalogues Saroyan summarizes the must-do's: not only the Benjamin Franklin's aphoristic "early rise" but also more practical tips like "shave but do not cut your left ear," "move in the direction of your rich friends," or "present an invention." By choosing the self-help genre, Saroyan reproduces the formal ingredients (Singleton 2004: 154) of the most demanded genre by the American readership during the crisis: the recipe format (the list of imperatives); the references to the addressee as an undifferentiated whole; the use of pseudo-scientific lingo to refer to the goal in question ("This step is technically known as *The Poverty-Stricken Capitalist Hop,*" 181; "I refer again to statistics," 180); the teaching through allegedly objective experiences; the identification of the problem ("Many people have written to me confidential letters asking me to tell them seven easy ways to make a million dollars," 178); the proposal of the solution ("Let me stress this: Don't look for a job because things are picking up and some thoughtless person is liable to hire you," 180) so that eventually the reading has a therapeutic effect: "one more hungry man of the world has been made happy and useful to society" (181).

10 Saroyan also subverts Carnegie's advice in a good number of his stories. Smiling is what the young protagonist of "The Oranges" is initially unable to do. Forced to sell fruit to the passing cars on Ventura corner (a name rife with symbolic overtones), with two of the biggest oranges in his hand, Luke (the onomasiological implications are clear again) cannot smile at people. His uncle and wife are in dire straits and desperately need the money so they push him to give the best of his smiles because people will buy the moment they see a happy child. Yet not a single orange is sold, and instead of smiling back some of them make faces. Luke wants to cry. His cheeks hurt with the effort of

forcing a broad smile during the whole afternoon (*Inhale and Exhale*, 37). More frequently, Saroyan uses laughter –high-pitched and even raucous, untimely and verging on madness– as a rebellion against the inequities and absurdities of the world; a Brechtian *gestus* revealing the heroic power of homeless, penniless and half starved people who are still capable of defeating death and chaos in order to reaffirm life and order: "They have nothing ... yet they laugh ...the glory fact of these ungodly days, the great American novel" ("Panorama Unmerciful," *Inhale and Exhale*, 245). "The laughter was the mouths of all the dead of the earth twisting with his mouth to the fierce wisdom of pain and death, and it meant this: *this* is idiocy and insanity" ("Hunger Laughing," *Inhale and Exhale*, 230). In "Laughing Sam," the newspaper boy, who is killed by the elevator at sixteen, hollers the headlines of accidents and tragedies in a strident laughter which the narrator is incapable of understanding at first but who later on interprets as disguised sadness and anger over the misery of the world. In "Taxi to Laughter & Life Unending" the nonplussed protagonist, "a caught mouse in a desolation of towers halls doors spaces enclosed desks contraptions machines" (*Inhale and Exhale*, 282); a sheepish clerk, enslaved to his work routine and family ties, smiles at commuters and at himself while seeing his face on the train window. All of a sudden the absurdity of his life ("where is my life where is my meaning," 282) is revealed to him in its grimmest hues. Despite complying with the establishment requirements ("he worked hard and he got himself through college and he went to the city and he saw he fitted into the idea very nicely," 282) he understands he has done nothing but ruin his life. The epiphany is foreshadowed by the outbreak of laughter: "Laugh at yourself with heart bitter and turn about to see face of him who goes to daily death with you" (282). It is then that he starts to rebel against his life's emptiness by getting on a taxi that will take him to the ocean. Laughing can also be interpreted as the aural sign which shows that the character has recovered a primitive force, "something old and savage and defiant" ("Aspirin is a member of the N.R.A.," *The Daring Young Man*, 1934: 85) which pushes him to scramble for sunlight. It is through laughter that he begins to "smash things, making a path for you to the sun, destroying cities, wrecking subways" (85).

11 Success, either in the shape of a horse race, a card game, a pinball machine or any other slot machine, is an impossible goal which prods Saroyan's characters into absurd actions. In one of the stories the name of the machine, the Crusader, bears clearly negative overtones. The medieval quest was a bloodshed whereby soldiers killed and travelled far from home in their quest of something that nobody was able to find: "The Holy Sepulchre." The image parallels the American obsession to make money, the ruthless race to get ahead; a game that is simultaneously cruel and futile. The living dead of "The Crusader," a story included in *Little Children*, Joe Torina, Jeff Logan, Marina Russek, and the rest of nameless farmers, attempt to evade reality – the frost has ruined the grape harvest, and there is no business – by playing pinball "from eight in the morning till three, four, five, and sometimes six in the next morning" (*Little Children*, 186-187). In the meantime signs of progress take over the city. Despite unemployment and starvation, the old telephone building is torn down to give way to a new one; and the outdated newspaper premises get remodelled. However, grief, loneliness, and incommunication divide characters from each other in unbreachable chasms. The ending is a landscape of monotony and serene sadness. Jeff realizes that the business of being alive is like a marble game: "he wanted more" but "there wasn't more" to find (198). As in the case of the Holy Sepulchre the name of the machine

conjures up, "you were only supposed to keep looking for it" (199) despite knowing there was nothing to look for.

12 A reversal of the happy ending of the rags-to-riches formula of the transplanted immigrant can also be found in "The Peasant," a bitter story that destroys the illusion of America as the promised land, although Sarkis, the big Armenian of Gultik, manages to make his dream come true. Sarkis arrives in New York in 1908, seven years before the Armenian genocide, and presently the new world greets him with a gnawing loneliness that keeps him from sleep. The priest advises to take a wife but nothing seems to alleviate the pains of homesickness and lostness. Finally he decides to move west and it is in Fresno that he starts to pick grapes that he places on a timber tray to let them dry in the sun. The reader is led to believe that the story is a celebration of the American Dream: Sarkis raises a family, works hard and as a reward by the sweat of his brow, and a stroke of luck, he thrives: he buys a house, a phonograph, an automobile; years later his prosperity goes on, and to a long list of electrical appliances (vacuum cleaners, radios, refrigerators, a tractor, the radio ...) he adds the enjoyment of leisure time on weekends: he takes his wife and children to ice-cream shops and movie theaters. Through the use of free indirect speech conveyed by means of short sentences strategically placed at intervals, and slightly modified so as to gain momentum, the reader discovers the unmistakable symptoms of progress, and the unambiguous appraisal of America as the land of plenty: from the protagonist's nagging initial uncertainty of "[i]t was all very good indeed: he would not say it was not good, but he did not know" (*Little Children*, 181); to the dissolution of any qualms in "[i]t was all fine. He knew it was all splendid" (182); to the thoroughly enthusiastic assertion of "[i]t was all marvellous ... It was a great age, a great time" (182). The last couple of clipped sentences are, however, added to cancel the reader's expectations about the hero fulfilling the American Dream. "Still it was sad. He did not know" (182). Albeit his material achievements, he does not belong. In fact, the feeling of alienation and rootlessness has never abandoned him. Years later, when asked "How do you like America?" by his fellow citizens, Sarkis, who is now a respected, well-to-do citizen, still gives the same laconic answer he provided the very first day he arrived in Fresno: "Go; come; and with men known and unknown turn trays. That's all. Go, come; go, come; know, unknown; and turn trays" (183). The experience of living in the can-do country has been downgraded to a repetitive, mechanical job which is done along with strangers one rarely speaks to. Spiritual isolation, and not success, closes the story.

13 "Harry" is also another tale which overturns the Horatio-Algerish expectations we may have about the protagonist's meteoric career. Like the typical Alger boys (Lhamon 1976), Harry is bold, plucky, ambitious, self-disciplined and virtuous. He is "too busy to fool around with girls" (181), and shows a clear preference to shopkeeper values: whatever he touches turns to money. Harry is a worldbeater, a go-getter. His glowing personality catapults him to a dazzling success. It is not only that he can persuade people to buy everything he sells: pictures of Jesus Christ and saints when he is only eight; romance novels and beauty secrets years later, and, when he is older, second-hand automobiles that he himself paints in bright colors. He has also the ability to change people's lives, as someone with a magnetic personality must inevitably do. Intoxicated with the venom of the romance novels, housewives start to cheat on their husbands, and girls lose their heads over the high school boys at the wheel of a gaudy car. Furthermore, he knows how to talk and is well-dressed, two essential requirements to have success. Yet the unravelling of the story is not Harry becoming a top notch

businessman but his sudden death before he was twenty-three: "Presidents and kings and movie stars, they all die, they all get sick" (*The Daring Young Man*, 185). Even though his photo appears on the newspaper, we discover that Harry was the loneliest person on earth, unable to make friends because he could not talk about anything but business. In fact even in his deathbed he is attempting to sell life insurance contracts to relatives and visitors. The celebrity resembles an Andersonian grotesque, and far from being an idol that children attempt to emulate, the parodic rendering of the story converts the hero into a comic legend, the butt of funny jokes: "And everybody laughs, remembering him, the way he rushed about town, waking people up, making deals ... All this will give you an idea what sort of a name Harry made for himself" (188). The story has become a burlesque of the American salesman.

Movies and ads

14 Frederic I. Carpenter (1947, qtd. Foster 1991:120) has characterized Saroyan as a romanticist which still perpetuates through his writings the principles of "a new transcendentalism." Saroyan's post-Kantian division of the universe into two separate entities – phenomenal and illusory – explains the tragedy of most of his characters, unable to keep a difficult balance between both levels, and condemned to be in a constant state of flux (Everding 1996). The first level is the world we see – a jumbled mix of disparate elements, a catalogue of loose pieces which can only be classified under the heading of disorder and impermanence, "a figment in the nightmare of an idiot" (*Razzle* Dazzle, 63). The second is the region of dreams, illusions, ideals, yearnings for love, beauty, music, etc. Art is the offspring of the second level whereas war, economy and machinery belong in the first area. "The Great Unwritten America" clearly illustrates the Saroyanesque segmentation of the universe. "There are two regions. One is on the surface and the other is elsewhere. The first is geographical ... the region of things, things that are material. ... The second region is ... the region of things not seen. It is the noblest of all regions" (*Inhale and Exhale*, 249).

15 The tragedy of the American citizen is that he has been forced to perceive only the first region and to ignore the second so that he has become a living dead, blindfolded, one who rises, goes to work and "returns to the slums of contemporary living" (*Inhale and* Exhale, 181-182), "harassed by fears" and worried about petty, pointless things. "Everybody [is] in pain," this is the gloomy conclusion that the narrator reaches in "Aspirin is a member of the N.R.A." To keep on working without losing sanity one needs to evade fundamentals. The sugar-coated pill comes in the guise of movies and ads. In "Solo for Tin Gazoo" the narrator's tone is even more hopeless and vindictive: "Unhappy days are here again. Movie-money for all good citizens. Deportation for radicals ... We have economic problems to solve, and the way to do it is to send America to a movie, and forget everything, especially humiliation" (*Inhale and Exhale,* 182). Not very different from Edward Hopper's paintings whereby it is always possible to see "an imaginary proscenium" framing almost everything (Hughes 1997: 423), Saroyan's short stories are dominated by characters hypnotized with movies in such a way that fiction has finally blurred, and more often obliterated, the contours of the real world. The image of America presented is obviously one of "heaven on earth" –"large, clear, undiseased," rife with sweet music, "clipped, fed, garmented and ready for love." In the hush of the dark theaters Americans can at least imagine the life they will never have.

When the sun rises they will have to get back to work in order "to preserve politics and oratory" (*Inhale and Exhale*, 181). The problem is not merely that the citizen rests contented with contemplating a fakery. Banard (1995) argues that during the thirties movies contributed to replacing the aspirations and dreams of the American workers with make-believe ideals of love and fortune so that their lives might appear less unbearable. Their therapeutic goal consisted not only in healing the wounds of the unemployed, penniless citizen by persuading him/her that being rich, or at least about to become rich, "was the normal lot of mankind" (Barnard 1995: 28), but also in creating "the parable of the democracy of goods": we are all equals as consumers, we have the same rights as buyers regardless of our social position, even though we cannot do anything much to change or influence matters of production and politics.

16 Furthermore, movies fulfill another ideological function: they anesthetize the audience's critical senses by forcing them to ignore their meaningless existence and take whatever is imposed on them. War, Saroyan never grows tired of repeating, is, to the average American citizen, "all fantasy and cinema" ("The Theatre of War," 1983: 224). By juxtaposing newsreels and melodramatic movies in the theater programs Americans have become emotionally dead, unable to react before tragedies, maybe because they are led to believe that documentaries are "malarkey," whereas Hollywood scenarios are real. Saroyan's priority is not to divert the Americans' eyes to another direction. He wants them to learn to see. "Careless looking," "[h]eedless vision," "[b]lind acceptance" [and] "[t]aking for granted" (Saroyan 1941: 203), the national ocular malady, must be healed at all costs. Like Saramago's characters of *Ensaio sobre a cegueira,* citizens need to recover their normal sight so that they can look at their lives in their true light. "The present intention of art is a hollow one": it does prevent us from seeing how lousy our reality is and, even more importantly, it does not present the possibility to change it. "[N]obody is around with both the perception to see the present reality for what it is and the personal vigor to personally expose it, and introduce an aspect of what it might be" (1939b: 875). The effect of Hollywood is to "force one man at a time into submission," nothing much can be done to transform the world.

17 "Secrets in Alexandria" revalidates the aforementioned assertion. David Bomerer, the lonesome bookkeeper who lives in a furnished room and spends his days trapped between the routine of paperwork, the absurdities of the world (war, inflation, gas-filled rooms...) and the ecstasy of motion pictures, is unable to fulfill his desires of love even though he is given a chance to meet the right girl. The three movies mentioned in the story – "She Done him Wrong," "Farewell to Arms" and "Sign of the Cross" – provide the protagonist with different opportunities to channel emotions that do not find a vent in the real world. In the first he manages to get rid of "the day by day identity" (*Inhale and Exhale*, 222): for a couple of hours he is the manly lover embracing Mae West in a "ruthless, animal way," not the sheepish, scared guy who wastes his life in an office. In addition to the dream of powerful masculinity the movie also gives him a chance to material success, for he imagines himself having "big cars, elegant manners, money to burn, delicious ladies coming and going" (221). In the second movie, a maudlin melodrama of the triumph of love and life over the atrocities of war, both David and Ruth feel "splendid for weeks," invigorated and determined to confront their problems, for after all it was wonderful, miraculous to be alive "in spite of manufactured conditions, wars, mass hatred by propaganda" (225). The third, dealing with the torture of the Christians in the Roman circus, make them feel angry, resentful

and powerful. At last they could find an enemy, the Romans, they could use as a catalyst to unbridle their rebellion instinct. Since "[f]ilms and other cultural artifacts contain and channel desires" (Lowry 1998: 131) that cannot come true or that are forbidden under the given social conditions, it is not surprising that the selected movies provide the illusion of desire fulfillment, and simultaneously cancel their realization. The dream of material wealth and true love will always be unattainable ideals outside the movie theater; their rebellion against the injustices will become a domesticated feeling after a while. The ending is "everybody lonely, no one able to touch another's life" (229). David takes Ruth for a prostitute and he leaves the theater immediately. Once more, Saroyan overturns the expectations of the romance melodrama: the "meet cute" of Hollywood comedies does not forecast the lovers' eventual union.

18 Advertising is another institution of the culture of abundance that is ridiculed in Saroyan's fiction: "production and sale, advertising and deception, promise and fraud, all these things have enslaved the people" (Saroyan 1961: 2). Parody must be here understood not only as a vehicle to showing "a world of simulacra, without depth, center, or causation" (Spariosu 1987: 59), but also as a form of self-reflexivity which aims to disrupt and transgress the norms (Hutcheon 2000). "Raisins" is a good case in point. The protagonist is Fresno, and the story is told by a choric narrator with clear Faulknerian echoes. Yet the theme is not the demise of a stagnant agrarian society which turns its back on progress but rather the transformation of the small town into a prosperous city when it manages to convert its main produce – raisins – into "a necessary part of the national diet" (Inhale and Exhale, 159) by means of costly full-page ads in the "Saturday Evening Post" and a catchy slogan, Have you had your iron today? Jackson Lears in Fables of Abundance (1994) argues that the twentieth century advertising industry is characterized by a movement away from the old natural, almost carnal nineteenth century attachment to goods, and the emergence of a rationalized approach to desire and consumption. Admen now prefer to show customers why they should rationally desire the product. Raisins "banish fatigue," and therefore wise people should never forget to eat a five-cent package each afternoon.

19 The small town community, with a mayor who "looked like a farmer" (158), and with only a department store where the clerks slept during the whole afternoon because the whole city slept, is a peaceful place anchored in the past, whereby the only signs of progress are the paving of the streets or the purchase by the city of a Ford automobile for the mayor. The disruptive force comes when an educated man who uses big words such as "co-operation, mass production, modern efficiency, modern psychology, modern advertising and modern distribution" (160) arrives in town and persuades that only a national advertising campaign will create such a demand for raisins that it will pay for the packing plant and the central office building. The idea is initially successful but after a while people stop eating raisins without any apparent reason. Despite low prices and efficiency, attractive packages and ads, the economic crisis demonstrates that "we hadn't changed the taste of man. Bread was still preferable to raisins" (163). The huge desert land around the town wins the battle over the machine: the big packing house, "a useless ornament in the landscape," is eventually abandoned, the machine turns to junk, and the townsfolk becomes "the contemporaries of jackrabbits" (163).

20 Not only does Saroyan look back with nostalgia to the Emersonian triumph of individualism and nature over the uniformity imposed by the machine age civilization. He also inveighs against the ubiquitousness of the phenomenal reality, the American slavery to form and matter, and the spiritual amnesia which he feared was bound to affect the nation in the following decades. By strategically turning around the categories and values of the hegemonic culture in his short fiction, the Californian writer manages to create a counter-discourse (Foucault 1978: 101) which destabilizes the legitimacy of the prevailing order. Through the parody of the vocabulary, catchphrases and persuasive strategies of the self-help genre and ads, and the transformation of the protagonists' conformist smiles into mad people's jarred laughter conveying dissidence and rebellion; or by means of the reversal of the generic conventions of the rags-to-riches formula, and the exposition of the narcotic effect of movies, Saroyan reappropriates the basic discursive elements of power with the aim of transforming their political value. Ultimately, the writer's goal is to remove the citizens' blinders so that they can abandon their materialistic aspirations and learn to dissent in a society which invariably imposes uniformization and conformity. His maladjusted characters are unable to make the grade, feel alien in a world that demands adjustment, insist on remaining outcasts in the "closed room" dominated by "a large rat race" of American society (Goodman 1960: 160), and eventually create a pocket of resistance which clearly anticipates the centrifugal flight of the Beat Generation.

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NOTES

1. I use the term "residual" as defined by Raymond Williams (1973: 10): "experiences, meanings and values which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture" but that are "lived and practised on the basis of the residue –cultural as well as social –of some previous social formation."

ABSTRACTS

Contrairement aux « grotesques » de Sherwood Anderson et aux « freaks » de Carson McCullers, condamnés à vivre dans l'isolement, malgré leurs vains efforts de communication, les fous excentriques de Saroyan poursuivent des rêves absurdes, bravent règles et conventions, et se sentent bien fiers de leur identité insolite dans un monde homogène qui s'obstine à effacer les différences. Dans « Hosey Gorsey and the Frog » (1968), un conte pour enfants apparemment innocent, l'écrivain centre sa critique sur la culture de l'abondance régnante (Susman 1980; Barnard 1995). Par une révision détaillée de ses romans, surtout de ceux publiés pendant la Grande Dépression, nous entendons montrer que l'œuvre brève de l'auteur, où les héros sont des personnages extravagants et des idéalistes surannés, peut être envisagée comme une tentative pour contredire, pour bouleverser ou résister aux valeurs et aux institutions de la société de consommation de masses: le mythe du succès et de la personnalité, l'influence omniprésente du cinéma et les spots publicitaires. Faisant appel à un contre-discours dont l'objectif ultime est de discréditer la légitimité de l'idéologie dominante, les récits de Saroyan mettent à nu l'esprit conformiste de l'Américain moyen.

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